

## Kurt Weitzmann

1904–1993

When Kurt Weitzmann died on 7 June at the age of eighty-nine, he had recently signed a contract for the republication of *Die Byzantinische Buchmalerei des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* and was proofreading the final draft of his study (written in collaboration with Massimo Bernabò) of the illustrated Octateuch manuscripts. One an expanded version of his 1934 *Habilitationschrift* and the other the result of nearly fifty years of research, these two books attest to Weitzmann's exceptional longevity and scholarly consistency. Together, they embody his greatness as the explorer and systematizer of a shattered artistic heritage, but they barely hint at the remarkable range and extraordinary importance of Weitzmann's contribution to the history of medieval art. In addition to studies of manuscript illumination, Weitzmann's publications include studies of ivory carving, icon painting, frescoes, and mosaics and comprise not only Byzantine, but also classical, Jewish, Early Christian, Armenian, Western, and Crusader materials, even touching Near Eastern and Islamic art.

Weitzmann was born on 7 March 1904 in Klein-Almerode near Kassel. After attending courses on ancient and Renaissance art taught by Martin Wackernagel, Arnold von Salis, Adolf von Harnack, Julius von Schlosser, Josef Strzygowski, Karl Maria Swoboda, and Emmanuel Löwy in Münster, Würzburg, and Vienna, he studied in Berlin with the archaeologist Ferdinand Noack and with the historian of medieval art Adolph Goldschmidt. Weitzmann completed the Ph.D. degree under Goldschmidt's direction in 1929, writing a thesis on the Byzantine ivory rosette caskets that was published as the first volume of Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts*; he then collaborated with Goldschmidt on the second volume of the ivories corpus and also prepared his *Habilitationschrift* under Goldschmidt's auspices.

Although Weitzmann was not Jewish, his close affiliation with Goldschmidt tainted him in the eyes of the Nazis, as did his public refusal to embrace National Socialist ideology. He left Germany in 1935 and took up residence in Princeton, where he lived for fifty-eight richly productive years with his wife, the art historian Josepha Weitzmann-Fielder. First as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study and, from 1945, also as a professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University, Weitzmann continued his studies of Byzantine manuscript illumination, joining a group of scholars headed by Charles Rufus Morey and Albert Mathias Friend, Jr., engaged in a project to prepare a corpus of illustrated manuscripts of the Septuagint. The volume on the Octateuchs is a product of this enterprise, as is the 1986 publication



of *The Cotton Genesis*. It was for the Septuagint corpus that Weitzmann traveled abroad and throughout the United States. He spent altogether a year on Mt. Athos during five trips, for instance, taking copious notes on all the illuminated manuscripts and by himself photographing the illustrations, headpieces, and initials; later, he spent about the same amount of time on Mt. Sinai. Weitzmann assembled these materials, along with photographs of related works, books, and notes, in Princeton's Manuscript Room, with its "cage," the famous inner sanctum where, over the years, Weitzmann graciously welcomed innumerable visiting scholars and students.

With Friend, Weitzmann also conducted a manuscript seminar, which he continued to direct until his retirement in 1972. Scholars in many fields attended the seminar: Wen Fong, Jonathan Brown, Kiyohiko Munakata, and Charles Dempsey, among others. And two generations of Princeton medievalists received training there and in Weitzmann's course on medieval ivories, among them Howard Davis, Paul Underwood, John Rupert Martin, Joseph Kelleher, Lawrence Eitner, William Loerke, Robert Koch, Thomas Hoving, Oleg Grabar, Robert Harris, James Snyder, George Galavaris, Samy Shenouda, Charles Minott, Robert McGrath, W. Eugene Kleinbauer, Henry Graham, Robert Deshman, Shigebumi Tsuji, Michael Taylor, Doula Mouriki, Archer St. Clair, Robert Bergman, Gary Vikan, Jeffrey Anderson, Birute Vileisis, and myself. In 1962, he offered the manuscript seminar at the Universität Bonn, where the participants included Konrad and Katherine Hoffmann, Ursula Nilgen, Rainer Kahsnitz, Rainer Hausscherr, Dietrich Kötzsche, and Liselotte Breitenbruch. Weitzmann was an exacting but nurturing teacher. Establishing very high standards for the papers delivered in his seminars, he criticized each presentation with astonishing knowledge and often in agonizing detail; but he respected the student's point of view and always distinguished between the work, which was open for debate, and the person, whose feelings had to be protected.

In preparing the Septuagint corpus and in teaching the manuscript seminar, Weitzmann came to discern the principles underlying the history of Byzantine manuscript illumination that he set forth in his most influential book, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration* (published by Princeton in 1947, reissued in revised form in 1970 and now translated into Spanish, Italian, and Japanese). Beginning with the tenet that what survives of ancient and medieval art is but a fragment of a once-vast production, *Roll and Codex* proceeds by reconstructing, through a precise analysis of the archaeological evidence, the general evolution of illustrated manuscripts, and then continues by establishing a method for interpreting extant witnesses. The work focuses on two turning points in the long history of illustrated books: the emergence of "papyrus style" illustration from an encounter between Egyptian hieratic rolls and Greek "continuous narrative" painting, and the gradual supersession of rotuli by parchment codices. The first is characterized by extensive sequences of rudimentary pictures introduced into narrow text columns; usually the work of the scribes themselves, these illustrations respond to nuances in the words and were to be viewed simultaneously with the reading of the scroll. The second betrays a gradual emancipation of miniature from text, in which true painters took advantage of the flat sequential pages in a codex. While acknowledging the close correspondence between "text criticism" and the methods he laid out in *Roll and Codex*, Weitzmann stressed the difference between the procedures and purposes of philology and "picture criticism," underscoring the

fluidity of iconographic transmission and hence the futility of any attempt to reconstruct fully missing pictorial archetypes.

In contrast to most scholars who saw Christian art emerging step by step from simple symbols and emblematic images to elaborate painted narratives, Weitzmann viewed it as an offshoot of an established tradition; indeed, as he argued most fully in the 1990 Dumbarton Oaks publication of *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, he believed that it depended largely on a precedent Jewish adaptation of hellenistic developments. As a result, Weitzmann presented the evolution of Christian art largely as a series of appropriations and adjustments of the ancient heritage. Thus, he was fascinated by the classical component in medieval art. In many articles and in *Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art* and *Ancient Book Illumination*, he used antique elements retrospectively to restore the lost tradition; while in *Geistige Grundlagen und Wesen der makedonischen Renaissance* and other essays, he probed the circumstances in which these elements reemerged during revival periods. Weitzmann argued, for example, that although Byzantine Octateuchs date *after* the Joshua Roll, they still serve as evidence of the rotulus' model because they preserve the "papyrus style"; and, at the same time, he concluded that the landscape and other "fill" motifs in the roll, apparent errors, and even the continuous format are tenth-century innovations that must be understood within the political and cultural ambitions of the Macedonian dynasty.

Weitzmann's search for methods to analyze Byzantine art grew into a long and important affiliation with Dumbarton Oaks. "Principles of Byzantine Book Illumination" was the title of a lecture he delivered in the Music Room in 1938, two years before the Blisses conveyed their property to Harvard; and five years later, the relationship between miniature and text was the subject of four lectures Weitzmann delivered at the symposium on Byzantine and Medieval Art and Literature. Weitzmann participated in six subsequent symposia, presiding with Carl Kraeling over the 1945 conference on the Dura Europos synagogue, serving as symposiarch of the 1953 meeting devoted to the cultural era of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and with Ernst Kitzinger organizing the 1965 symposium on the Byzantine contribution to Western art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In addition, the 1990 symposium was dedicated to him. He also served Dumbarton Oaks as an adviser to the library, as a member of the Board of Scholars (1957–72), and as a Visiting Scholar (1972–74). He contributed often to *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* and wrote the third volume of the *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collections*, devoted to ivories and steatites. Copies of the photographs of illuminated Greek manuscripts he amassed during the course of his lifetime constitute the Kurt Weitzmann Archive at Dumbarton Oaks.

From the beginning of his studies of Byzantine manuscripts, Weitzmann had planned to work at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai. After three unsuccessful attempts, he finally reached the Holy Mountain in 1956. Beginning then and during four later visits sponsored by the Alexandria-Michigan-Princeton Expedition (co-directed by George Forsyth), Weitzmann examined nearly 2,000 manuscripts, taking extensive notes, as had been his custom at Athos, but this time employing professional photographers, Fred Anderegge and John Galey. In 1990 Princeton published the first volume of *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: Illuminated Manuscripts* (written in collaboration with George Galavaris).

What surprised Weitzmann on his trip to Sinai, changing the direction of his schol-

arship and, with it, the whole history of Byzantine and Crusader period art, was the encounter with the Sinai icons. To be sure, Georgios and Maria Soteriou had already published some 150 panels. But Weitzmann counted 2,048, most in need of restoration and full documentation. Negotiating with Egyptian officials and the abbot of St. Catherine's, deploying Bedouins to haul water from cistern to darkroom, and scrutinizing the panels to record all aspects of technique, style, and iconography, Weitzmann conducted the work that resulted in numerous articles and, ultimately, in the magnificent first volume of *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*, in which he introduced unique pre-Iconoclastic icons and paintings from the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Mt. Sinai and its icons focused Weitzmann's attention on the importance of *loca sancta* and pilgrimage. Overseeing the restoration of the great Transfiguration mosaic and publishing its iconography, he disclosed the peculiarly local aspects of the emphasis on Moses and Elijah (*The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian* [with G. Forsyth]). And he began to stress the influence of holy places in various other works of art, particularly those produced in Palestine. Already in 1944 Weitzmann had broken ground by arguing that the production of illustrated manuscripts in Constantinople had not come to a halt during the Latin conquest. Now, by drawing on Hugo Buchthal's discoveries in the field of Crusader Period manuscripts, he identified groups of Sinai panels bearing distinct stylistic and iconographic features as products of Western painters working in Eastern lands. As is typical of all Weitzmann's research, this work was not limited to an analysis of technical aspects but poses new questions of the material and offers provocative answers that are still being understood, interpreted, and assimilated.

The encounter with Crusader icons reinforced Weitzmann's lifelong commitment to study medieval art as a whole, recognizing the differences between Byzantine and Latin manifestations but also seeing fundamental connections through common origins and continual contact. Attracted by Carolingian art from the beginning of his career, he felt entirely at ease accepting the Vatican's invitation to study the ivory throne of Charles the Bald, and, when it turned out that the ninth-century carvers had reused some East Christian plaques, he was uniquely competent to investigate the origin of the earlier reliefs, too. The most vivid realization of Weitzmann's wide-ranging control of early medieval art was the "Age of Spirituality," a 1977–78 exhibition he organized with Margaret Frazer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The uncomfortably stilted title reflects the exhibition's originality, for no term had yet been coined to encompass the message conveyed by the nearly 600 objects assembled from more than 100 collections. Organized in five great "realms"—imperial, classical, secular, Jewish, and Christian—the dazzling presentation demonstrated the unity of Late Antique art that Weitzmann had stressed in his writings and, at the same time, the gradual metamorphosis of pagan culture into something distinctly new.

Perhaps most remarkable about Weitzmann's extraordinarily broad and penetrating scholarship is how much of it was founded on materials that were unknown or inadequately studied until he turned attention to them: the ivory caskets, Sinai apse mosaic, pre-Iconoclastic and Crusader icons, Hercules plaques from the Vatican throne, Grado ivories, and the Dionysiou Lectionary, among many others. If he is best known for the

general principles he articulated for reconstructing the vanished art of the Middle Ages, he will also be remembered for what he restored to the canon of medieval and Byzantine monuments.

The precision and energy of Weitzmann's scholarship reflects the discipline and seriousness with which he approached his life's work. As his collaborator on the *Cotton Genesis* and as co-author of the *Dura Synagogue* volume, I can attest to the exceptional dispassion with which he weighed the ideas of a younger scholar and former student, considering them carefully even when they contradicted his own, and, in the end, either accepting them, refuting them, or letting them stand alongside his. Although he never ceded a point when he believed he was right, his conviction that scholarship was an organic process, slowly taking form in the warmth of many minds, is evident in the responses to counterarguments included in the revisions of his work and in the published judgments of the severest critic of all, himself.

Kurt Weitzmann's achievement was recognized by his election as Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society, and as member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Athens. The Bundesrepublik Deutschland awarded him the Great Cross of Merit and the universities of Heidelberg, Chicago, and Berlin conferred honorary degrees on him. Following his last professional appearance this past winter at a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition *Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia*, a bound typescript of a *Festschrift* was presented to him; and, during the final months, he was able to read the seventy-six articles that will be published next year in that tribute to his scholarly accomplishments. The very same January day, he also learned of the honor he cherished above all the others: he received notice that Princeton University intended to present him with the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa* at the 8 June commencement. All spring he looked forward to this public recognition by the institution to which he had devoted his life. But he died one day before graduation, the degree having been bestowed by President Harold Shapiro in an earlier bedside ceremony in the company of Josepha Weitzmann-Fielder and a few friends and students.

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